

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
Effects of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma on the August 2017
Advance Monthly Sales for Retail & Food Services Report

How much do the areas that had the biggest impact from Hurricane Harvey typically represent of the nation's retail and food services sales?

The monthly retail trade programs are not designed to measure retail and food services activity at specific geographic levels, so current estimates of spending in those areas are unavailable.

For data from other Census Bureau sources on the areas impacted by Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, please see the Census Bureau's Emergency Preparedness page at <https://www.census.gov/topics/preparedness.html>.

Does the Census Bureau produce monthly retail and food services sales estimates for the affected sample areas?

No. We cannot isolate the effect of Hurricane Harvey on the Advance Monthly Retail Trade and Food Services Survey (MARTS) estimates since the sample is designed to measure retail and food services activity at the national level and not at specific geographic areas.

Even though we cannot isolate the effect, we did receive indications from the companies that the hurricane had both positive and negative effects on their sales data while others indicated they were not impacted at all. Some firms reported a drop in sales due to permanent or temporary store closures and stores having reduced business due to damage, shipment delays, etc. For companies impacted by Hurricane Harvey, we review their contribution to the estimates to ensure accurate representation to the overall industry estimates.

How was the collection of retail and food services data affected by the Hurricanes?

Overall response was within the range of the past 12 months even though collection in the Hurricane Harvey and Irma areas lagged behind recent months. However, many large, regional, and other multi-location firms with reporting offices outside the affected areas responded at a normal rate and included sales data for stores, both open and closed, located in the affected areas. For the entire survey, the unit response rate (URR)¹ for August 2017 was 47.0% compared to a range of 43.5% to 51.2% in the preceding 12 months. The dollar volume response rate (DVRR)² for August 2017 was 44.4% compared to a range of 39.9% to 50.8% in the preceding 12 months. Companies unable to respond in time for the MARTS are contacted as part of our Monthly Retail Trade Survey (MRTS) data collection process, as normal.

¹ URR is defined as the percentage of active reporting units that were eligible for data collection that responded to the survey.

² DVRR is defined as the percentage of the previous month's data used in the estimate times the percentage of the current month's reported data used.

Did the Census Bureau change its data collection procedures this month?

Yes. Our data collection changed in the following ways: (1) our electronic instrument requested responding companies describe how their business was impacted by Hurricane Harvey, (2) our data collection staff inquired about the impacts of Hurricane Harvey as part of their normal follow-up operations, (3) in order to allow companies to focus on their priorities, we did not conduct telephone follow-up in the Hurricane Harvey impacted areas, and (4) telephone follow-up was accelerated in Florida in order to obtain as much August data as possible prior to the impacts of Hurricane Irma.

Were there any estimates withheld or delayed because of data collection problems?

No. All estimates were released as scheduled on September 15, 2017.

As a result of Hurricane Harvey, did the Census Bureau modify its usual weighting or estimation methods used to produce advance monthly sales estimates for August 2017?

No. Because the advance sample is designed to measure retail and food services sales at the national level and not at specific geographic areas; there is not sufficient evidence to support a change.

Has the reliability of the advance monthly sales estimates changed because of Hurricane Harvey?

No, the reliability of the advance estimates as measured by the coefficient of variation for monthly totals and the standard error for month-to-month change has not changed substantially. For the published industries, reported sales for August 2017 exhibited variation similar to that for prior months. While a few individual firms reported large increases or decreases in their sales because of the effects of the hurricane, this additional variation was not large enough to substantially affect the reliability of the published estimates.

Did the Census Bureau alter the procedures for developing seasonally adjusted estimates for the Advance Monthly Sales for Retail and Food Services?

No. The monthly review process of the seasonal adjustment output and diagnostics did not indicate that adjustments to the parameters were necessary for August.

What activities are the Census Bureau planning to ensure the affected areas will continue to be accurately represented?

As part of our data collection, we will continue to ask questions that will help us monitor impacts from the affected areas. We will monitor data responses and make adjustments if necessary.

Source: U. S. Census Bureau
Economic Indicators Division

Last Revised: September 15, 2017